Dressed for Success: Uniforms and Women's Athletics

By Pamela Grundy*

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Could you imagine playing basketball in a skirt that reached down to your toes? How about in a shiny pair of satin shorts? Over the past 100 years or so, women's basketball uniforms have changed constantly. What women and girls have worn has often seemed as meaningful as how they played.

Uniforms mattered because the public often considered competitive athletics to be a man's activity, much like business or politics. It was far easier for female athletes to gain acceptance if they conformed to, or fit, society's notions of how women should look and act. These social expectations for women have shifted several times in the last century. Uniforms for basketball—for many years, one of the only sports that women could compete in—have followed suit.

At the start of the 1900s, standards for female modesty in dress and behavior were high. For instance, students at the all-female State Normal School (now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) concealed themselves beneath several layers of clothes before heading to the gym. "After players put on their 'gym' suits, they put on long black stockings, a top skirt which had a way of hanging down behind, and a coat around the shoulders," recalled 1910 graduate Marion Stevens Hood. "The rear effect of the whole outfit reminded one of a rooster's tail feathers in wet weather, but we were nothing if not sticklers to the strictest sense of modesty."

The 1901 squad from the State Normal School definitely met these expected standards for women. Players wore heavy, dark skirts that reached to their shoe tops, lengthy sleeves that stretched well beyond their wrists, and collars that pulled tight to their necks. For many years, women played basketball in long skirts or in heavy wool "bloomers"—blousy pants that resembled skirts.

By the 1920s, however, social expectations for women had begun to change. Their clothes changed, too. The decade brought in the "flapper" period, a time when movies and magazines highlighted attractive, flirtatious women who wore lighter, shorter dresses. Female basketball players quickly adopted the new standards, shedding some of their heavy garb.

In Charlotte, the girls of Central High School not only wore shorter sleeves and bloomers, but they were daring enough to roll their socks or hosiery below their knees. "We rolled

out," team member Elizabeth Newitt said many years later. "We wore hose, and if you see this picture, we've got our hose rolled down. You see how we did it." Female players grew even more excited a few years later. Bloomers began to give way to shorts, which were even easier to play in and looked more up-to-date. Many young women also enjoyed the shock that their new outfits could produce.

Katharine Farris Moyle, who played for Charlotte's Thomasboro High in the 1940s, laughed as she recalled the day her grandmother saw her wearing blue satin shorts. "One day I was going to a game, and my mother said, 'Go let Mama see your basketball uniform,'" Moyle said. "And I said, 'Are you sure?' And she said, 'Yes.' So I go down and show my grandmother my basketball uniform, and she just about had a fit, because I was so exposed and because I was going out and being seen by all these people with that skinny uniform on."

With this physical freedom came a new competitive intensity. Right after World War II, hundreds of North Carolina high schools fielded basketball teams for girls. Southern textile mills, which employed large numbers of women, also sponsored highly competitive squads. The most notable of these teams was the Hanes Hosiery Girls, which represented Winston-Salem's Hanes Hosiery plant. The team won three straight national Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) championships from 1951 to 1953.

These good times for female athletes, how-ever, did not last. The 1950s ushered in an era that celebrated housewives who were de-
voted to home and family—not to competitive athletics. Worries that strenuous competition was not good for young women began to resurface across the country. North Carolina legislators banned the state high school championship for girls in 1953. Dozens of women's sports teams were disbanded. Cheerleading, not basketball, became the top female sporting activity.

In the 1970s, when the women's liberation movement began to challenge limitations on female citizens' lives and activities, more teams for female athletes finally began to return. At that point, uniforms often became a symbol of female players' second-class status. At Raleigh's Millbrook High School, for example, the boys' basketball team regularly got new garb. The girls never did. Tired of trying to make do with ancient, ill-fitting uniforms, team members decided to sew their own.

The new uniforms had drawbacks. "That season we were hot—literally and figuratively," recalled player Susan Shackelford, who graduated in 1972. "The design looked great, but the fabric was everybody's favorite '70s blend: polyester. Only a few trips up and down the court, and I felt like a Mississippi steamboat was making the rounds under my uniform."

Still, the kind of determination that led the Millbrook players to take matters into their own hands continued to push women's sports forward. With help from a piece of federal legislation known as Title IX, a series of ever-more-talented female athletes helped create a new vision of a more assertive, athletic womanhood. Women's uniforms began to look a lot like men's, with an emphasis on function and comfort.

Contrasts remain between the sweat and exertion of high-level competition and traditional visions of feminine appearance, however. Female athletes still struggle to negotiate or manage those differences. Some wear makeup during games. Others balance their aggressive competition on the court with behavior and dress that are more "ladylike" once the contest ends.

Sometimes, a player has to go even further. North Carolina saw an especially dramatic example in 1997, when Tiffany Cummings joined the South Robeson High School girls' basketball team. Tiffany's strictly religious father thought that women should be modest, and he believed shorts were for men. He would not allow Tiffany to wear the team uniform. Instead, she dribbled, passed, and shot the ball wearing a home-sewn skirt that fell below her knees.

But like so many young women over the years, Tiffany did not let how she looked get in the way of playing the game she loved. Her skirt seemed odd to some people, but it did not stop her from becoming her team's star. "A lot of people thought it was ridiculous," she told the Raleigh *News and Observer*. "But I think I've proved them wrong."

Title IX Gets Women off the Sidelines

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

—Education Amendments of 1972, Title IX

In 1970 hardly any North Carolina women had the chance to play varsity sports. High schools offered few teams for females, and colleges, almost none. Not a single state championship existed for girls in any sport.

Today, in contrast, female athletes enjoy all sorts of opportunities. The North Carolina High School Athletic Association sponsors championships for young women in 11 sports, including basketball, volleyball, soccer, and lacrosse. Colleges offer even more programs. Women win scholarships, professional contracts, and international recognition. Overall, women's athletics still does not enjoy the prestige or the funding of men's. But women have come a long way.

What brought about this change? A large share of the credit goes to a piece of federal legislation known as Title IX—part of an education bill passed by Congress and signed by President Richard Nixon in 1972. Title IX said that colleges and secondary schools receiving federal funds could not discriminate against women in any of their programs. (Discrimination means treating someone differently or favoring someone based on gender, race, or anything other than individual merit.)

Title IX resulted from a growing women's liberation movement that sought equal rights. During the 1960s, many American women sought to enter male-dominated fields. They took new kinds of jobs, ran for public office, and challenged institutions that limited women's opportunities. Title IX brought that battle for equality to the educational arena.

When Title IX became law, no one was thinking about sports. Those who cre-ated the legislation wanted schools to stop barring women from certain classes and to treat them fairly when they applied for jobs. Few women played competitive sports at the time. Almost no one imagined that women would want equality in athletics. But it turned out that many did. Soon after Title IX passed, aspiring female athletes began to ask for more teams and more funds for women's sports.

Change did not come easily. Many schools were reluctant to increase overall spending on athletics. Men's teams showed little interest in sharing their resources. Even with Title IX, it took decades of hard work—and more than a few lawsuits—for women's teams to win broad-based support. Bit by bit, they gained ground across the country.

Starting with a handful of teams, North Carolina women in the 1970s and 1980s built programs, leagues, and rivalries. Women's basketball began to regain the popularity it had enjoyed in the 1920s through 1940s. Gibsonville's Kay Yow led the way as head coach at North Carolina State University. In Chapel Hill, coach Anson Dorrance helped the University of North Carolina take the lead in a sport that was somewhat new to women: soccer. Between 1981 and 2010, Dorrance's Tar Heels won 21 national college titles.

As college sports grew, and female athletes became better known, more and more younger women took up athletics. For the 2010–2011 school year, the N.C. High School Athletic Association counted nearly 90,000 female athletes, along with 122,000 male athletes. Some of these young women likely hoped for college scholarships and professional careers. Others would carry the lessons of athletics—things like discipline, determination, and teamwork—into many other areas that the women's liberation movement had opened to them.

Pamela Grundy served as the conceptual editor for the fall 2011 issue of Tar Heel Junior Historian. *She is an independent scholar and the author of* Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina *(UNC Press, 2001), as well as the author of an eighth-grade North Carolina social studies textbook.*